

Online study: postgraduate student perceptions of core skills development

Patricia E. Grounds¹ and Caroline Moore²

Abstract. In this qualitative study, we analyze postgraduate students' perceptions of strategic behaviors they developed during their online studies and their ability to extend this behavior to their own praxis. Findings suggest that strategic behavior centers around the development of four core skills: engaging in self-directed thinking; fostering effective communication; fostering leadership and shared responsibility; and using technology to reinforce, extend, and deepen learning. Through a dialogic process, where the presence of a supportive online community of practice plays a central role, participants appear to use these skills to engage in a process of un-learning and re-learning. The asynchronous modality of the online medium, allowing delayed rather than immediate responses, appeared to facilitate deeper, more considered constructions of new understandings. Ultimately, this online modality appears propitious in building self-confidence, thus empowering participants to act in their professional domain.

Keywords: 21st century skills, online professional development, dialogic, community of practice.

1. Introduction

This paper explores how six teachers of English as a second or other language, graduates of a UK university's online Master of Arts (MA) in English Language Teaching (ELT), perceive their strategic development during their studies. Volunteer participants were working and studying simultaneously, allowing researchers to probe their perceptions of skills they used for mastering postgraduate course content and for application to professional activities.

1. The British Council, Mexico City, Mexico; p.grounds@soton.ac.uk

2. University of Guadalajara Cucosta, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico; caro_moore@yahoo.com

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For learners and users of English as a second or other language, the development of strategic behaviors has been a priority since the ‘four skills approach’ emerged in English language teaching and learning.

Recently, studies into skills and strategies have expanded beyond the second language classroom, moving into the wider framework of skills which meet the demands of the day-and-age. Generally labeled ‘21st century skills’, they favor the development of strategies for more effective behaviors in study, at work, and for life. Skills for effective problem solving, critical and creative thinking, collaboration and social action, and accessing new knowledge all figure in a 21st century skills framework; although definitions are various (Bellanca & Brandt, 2010), its visibility in current educational policy-making justifies further exploration.

In our role as online MA tutors, we had noticed during forum interaction the development of particular strategic behaviors in course participants. Since these behaviors resonated with core skills categories from the British Council’s (2016) ‘core skills for learning and society’, we adopted this framework to scaffold our study.

Drawing on Fullan and Langworthy (2013), among others, the British Council framework proposes the skills categories of critical thinking and problem Solving, collaboration and communication, creativity and imagination, citizenship, digital literacy, student leadership, and personal development. For our study, we narrowed the scope to the four highest resonating categories, adding some further glossing (Table 1). These categories underpinned the design of our data collection instrument.

Table 1. The core skills framework for the study (abridged)

<p>Core Skill 1 Engaging in self-directed thinking</p> <p>Skills involve critical thinking and problem solving: processes are essentially self-initiated, self-monitored, and self-corrective.</p>	<p>Core Skill 2 Fostering effective communication</p> <p>Skills for collaborative and constructive dialogue include clarity of thinking, empathy, and respect.</p>
<p>Core Skill 3 Fostering leadership and shared responsibility</p> <p>Skills include knowing when and how to assume the lead and/or sharing responsibility with others.</p>	<p>Core skill 4 Using technology to reinforce, extend, and deepen learning</p> <p>Skills involve discovering, mastering, and communicating knowledge and information to a global community.</p>

The guiding research questions for the study were:

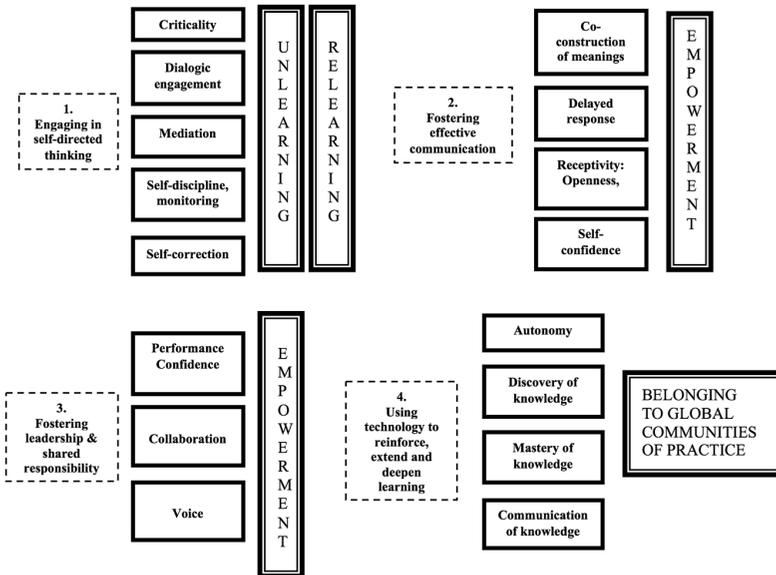
Q1. Which key skills do participants perceive that they effectively develop during postgraduate study?

Q2. How do these skills enable participants to interpret their understanding of the wider issues in their local ELT contexts?

2. Method

Adopting a qualitative interpretative approach (Mackey & Gass, 2005) to investigate participant perceptions of their skills development online, we approached potential participants online, delivering a questionnaire via individual emails and using individual Skype interviews for validity checking of our interpretations of participants' words and to reconfirm permission to quote anonymously. Centered around the core skills framework (Figure 1), questionnaire items prompted introspections and probed reflections on strategic behaviors related to participants' online studies and to the application of skills and knowledge to their professional contexts.

Figure 1. Data analysis process: core skills, themes, and higher order categories



We applied a layered approach to data analysis, using a three-stage thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). First, researchers identified and grouped prominent themes emerging from the data; next, data under each of these themes were re-analyzed and redistributed, using the core skills framework (Figure 1), to ascertain links between skills development and online learning (Research Question 1). In relation to Research Question 2, patterns were sought in the data and a more holistic underlying framework was suggested, consisting of three higher-order categories: un-learning/re-learning, empowerment, and belonging to global communities of practice (Figure 1).

3. Discussion

Our analysis provided insights on the kinds of skills-building which participants perceive as facilitated by their online postgraduate study. Participants describe how such Core Skills (CSs) can be usefully applied to the tasks of teacher-learning and professional practice, as these data extracts suggest:

“The skills I developed to analyze critically research from other countries, helped me analyzed [sic] my own context to provide more effective guidance for my students in their acquisition of the language” (CS1).

“Now I am able to share my points of view with others, to propose solutions and also to defend the ideas that I think must be taken into consideration to improve the different areas of my teaching context” (CS2).

“The programme provided me with a vision of [...] the numerous phenomena in ELT [...] that has helped me to think of possible research studies that might be carried out in order to contribute to improve the results in my teaching context and in other teaching contexts” (CS3).

“I need technology in order to have access to the sources of information that will allow me to continue growing professionally and also to develop or choose material that my students can use to improve [...] their command of English” (CS4).

This and other data suggests that the four core skills in Figure 1 function in an essentially dialogic fashion, whereby strategic behaviors that participants perceived they had developed during online study then fed into participants’ professional practice, mediating between the two domains of learning and praxis in the form

of both external and internal dialogue. Additionally, data suggests that learning for professional development involves a process of challenging current beliefs and practices, followed by the dismantling of old habits or axioms, before learners can move forward toward more effective practice (un-learning/re-learning):

“The discussion forums raised my level of awareness by reading for information, asking and answering questions or self-directed learning, i.e. finding out by reading to understand, at the same time assimilating and processing colleagues’ knowledge to add to my own, before responding”.

As this and other data suggest, it appears that an asynchronous modality of communication, allowing reflection time and delayed response, is a powerful tool in this process of un-learning and re-learning. Not only might it facilitate self-directed thinking, but it may also contribute to the building of self-confidence, the construction of voice, and eventually lead to willingness to assume leadership roles in local arenas. Similar findings are echoed in a selection of papers in [Tomei \(2006\)](#).

4. Conclusions

Our analysis leads us to conclude that un-learning and re-learning is facilitated when space is created for teachers to re-think in collaboration with others; an asynchronous medium allowing delayed, more considered, responses, appears to be propitious for this. A supportive community of learning can generate individual growth and self-confidence, with an empowering effect on its members, as they enable each other to find their voice. Membership of a global ELT discourse community seems to generate the confidence to assume leadership in local ELT practice.

In answer to our research questions, (1) through the medium of international online study, cognitive and attitudinal space can be created, favoring more critical learning and specific key skills development, and (2) the strategic behaviors which learners see themselves as having developed through their online studies are also perceived as having transfer-value to local contexts.

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